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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the recent education reforms in the United Kingdom (UK) in terms of their contribution to the establishment of an equitable system of education income distribution. The UK education market as it exists today was set in motion by a package of reforms introduced as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act. That legislation was designed to deregulate both the demand and supply sides of state-provided education--to empower the customers and to make schools more responsive to consumer demand. This case study of three adjacent local education agencies (LEAs) in London obtained data from interviews with: 130 parents in the process of deciding on a secondary school for their children; and key informants in 15 schools, including administrators, teachers, union representatives, and bursars. Four key findings emerged: (1) the market is a middle-class mode of social engagement; (2) parental choice of school is class- and race-informed; (3) schools are increasingly oriented toward meeting the perceived demands of middle-class parents; and (4) the cumulative impact of the first three findings is the "de-comprehensivisation of secondary schooling." Across schools, there is an intensification of status hierarchies, provisional differentiation, and segregation within the state system. Choice, however regulated, is not the solution to inequity. From a needs-based perspective, primacy should be given to establishing comprehensive pupil intakes, to allocating resources in ways that will facilitate the realization of children's learning potentials, and to making schools responsive to the values and cultures of the children who attend them. (LMI)

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Choice, competition and equity: lessons from research in the UK.

By **Sharon Gewirtz, Richard Bowe** and **Stephen Ball**

Paper prepared for the symposium, 'Lessons in School Reform from Great Britain? The Politics of Education Policy Appropriation and Transfer', Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, New Orleans, 6 April 1994.

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Introduction

One of the key arguments deployed in favour of markets in education is that educational systems which have choice and competition as their organising principles are more equitable than those which are (entirely) bureaucratically planned and controlled. Choice systems have been advocated on the grounds of equity both by those on the right and on the left of the political spectrum. In the US, former President Bush argued that the allocation of children to schools by zoning had placed 'working poor and low income families at the greatest disadvantage' (cited in Maddaus 1990). In the UK, Norman Tebbit, a staunch Thatcherite and member of the Cabinet from 1981 to 1987, defended the 1987 Education Reform Bill (later to become the 1988 Education Reform Act) thus:

> The Bill extends choice and responsibility. Some will choose badly or irresponsibly but that cannot and must not be used as an excuse to deny choice and responsibility to the great majority. Today, only the wealthy have choice in education and that must be changed.
>
> (Tebbit (1989) Second Reading of the 1987 Education Reform Bill)

In a speech espousing choice in education, Kenneth Clarke (1991) (UK Secretary of State for Education 1990-1992) repeated the argument that the system of allocation to secondary schools which operated prior to the ERA favoured the rich, dubbing that system 'selection by mortgage'. And a pamphlet, published in the UK by the neo-liberal Institute for Economic Affairs (Seldon 1981), claimed that a market in education would extend more broadly 'the dignity of choice and personal responsibility now reserved for the wealthy and articulate'. (See also Seldon 1986.)

From the left, the Australian, Stephen Crump (1994, pp.3-4) has defended the **principle** of choice on similar grounds:

> The rich have always been able to buy a 'better' education in either the public or private systems with few exceptions. Wealthy families have always had the option to choose their children's education through the location of their home (near a well-resourced state school or in suburbs well-served by private options), through manipulating zoning rules (sometimes corruptly) or simply through paying private school fees that the majority of the population can not afford ... One of the hardest positions for opponents of public school choice to defend is the denial of choice for the less affluent, less articulate or less politically mainstream communities. Despite the attempts of a century of formal state-controlled education, 'Inequities in the distribution of resources, opportunities and responsibilities, often sanctioned by the predominating hierarchical structures of social organisation, have not only continued but assumed more virulent forms' (Lucas 1972, p.377).

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Also on the left, Charles Glenn (1989), from the US, has supported and implemented 'controlled choice' policies on the grounds that these have the potential to create positive diversity in place of the negative diversity produced by a zoned system - a system marked by disparities 'in quality and in the real opportunities offered - between rich and poor communities and even from school to school in the same district' (p295). In the UK, equitable choice policies have been recommended to the National Commission on Education in two briefing papers by left-leaning academics (Walford 1993 and Adler 1993).

This paper is concerned to evaluate the recent UK education reforms in terms of their contribution to the establishment of an equitable system of educational income distribution. Much of the debate over the merits and demerits of choice and competition in education has taken place at a theoretical level. It is our contention that any adequate evaluation of choice policies cannot be based on abstract theorisation alone, but must rest on an understanding of the practical and political realities of actually-enacted choice programmes. As Ellmore (1990) has argued, 'Whether more client choice is 'better', by whatever criteria, depends not on general normative principles but rather on the specific political, institutional, and individual context within which choice occurs' (p289). Here we draw on the empirical findings of a three-year study of the UK education market - 'The operation and effects of markets in secondary education'[1].

We begin by examining the different conceptions of equity implicit in left- and right-wing arguments for choice and competition and we identify two contrasting tests of equity which we will use to assess the reforms. We then summarise the main elements of the UK education market before moving on to describe the aims, scope and methodology of our study. We will report those findings of our study which have a bearing on issues of equity and we will explore on the basis of these findings the extent to which the UK market is enhancing equity according to the two tests identified. Finally, we discuss the extent to which our findings are specific to the UK education market and whether there are aspects which may be generalisable beyond the UK.

Defining equity

There appear to be two competing conceptions of equity implicit in the arguments advanced in favour of choice in education. Broadly speaking, the arguments of those on the right seem to be predicated on a desert-based definition of equity and those on the left appear to be using a needs-based definition.

Desert-based equity

Desert-based conceptions of equity are based on the contention that goods should be distributed according to merit or desert. This principle is seen to be vital to the healthy and proper functioning of a market economy because it is believed to provide an incentive for individuals to behave in productive ways. Merit has traditionally been defined by proponents of educational differentiation in terms of intellectual ability. This is the conception of desert implicit in Kenneth Clarke's (1991) critique of the UK comprehensive system in which children were allocated to schools on the basis of residence:

> The way in which Labour made our schools comprehensive from the 1960s onwards damaged opportunities very seriously for children from poor families in deprived parts of our cities. Selection by mortgage replaced selection by examination and the eleven plus route was closed for many bright working-class boys and girls. (pp. 2-3)

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[1]Supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant no. R000232858)

However, what has become more prominent in much Conservative discourse and policy during the Thatcher/Major era is the association of desert with motivation. Within the motivation-oriented discourse, the working class is effectively divided into two groups, corresponding to Victorian notions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. The 'deserving' poor are characterised as respectable, aspiring, thrifty and industrious; if they are unemployed it is because they are the unlucky casualties of the recession; they desire to own their own homes; they care about their children's progress at school; and most importantly they are potential Tory voters. The 'undeserving', on the other hand, are unemployed because they are lazy; they are happy to 'sponge off' the welfare state; they are the single parents who get pregnant in order to jump the housing queue[2]; they do not care about education; they allow their children to truant and to become habitual young offenders; and they are unlikely ever to vote Conservative. They are a demonised and mythologised group which, we suggest, exist more in the imaginations and rhetoric of right-wing Conservatives than in reality; but they provide convenient scapegoats, allowing attention to be diverted from the government's failing economic policies. Their 'undeservingness' may also be useful in helping to justify the redistribution of scarce public resources away from the most disadvantaged in society.

Conservative welfare policies since 1979 appear to have been designed to reward the 'deserving' and penalise the 'undeserving', that is to reverse what Thatcher/Major-ites claim was the organising principle of the pre-1979 welfare state. In housing the 'right to buy' policy and more recent attempts to change the rules of council home allocation so that single parents are no longer prioritised are aimed at benefiting those sectors of the population deemed more 'respectable' and hence 'deserving'. Giving single parents preferential welfare treatment is believed to encourage what is presented as the objectionable practice of single parenthood. In health care, funds for preventative medicine have been channelled into health promotion clinics to which individuals are expected to refer themselves rather than into programmes likely to reach those with greatest need. It is a system of health income allocation designed to reward those who help themselves. The self-help message is also starkly represented in the redesignation of Unemployment Benefit as the Job Seekers Allowance and in schemes for the unemployed like 'Job Clubs' and 'Restart'.

From the perspective of adherents of the deserving/undeserving distinction, choice in education is viewed as another mechanism which will more effectively distribute social income according to motivation. One of the messages embedded in the UK market is that parents who make 'good' and 'responsible' choices are likely to be rewarded with a 'better' education for their children than those who choose 'badly' or 'irresponsibly' (to use Tebbit's terms - see above)[3]. As will have been evident from the way we have represented the distinction between the so-called 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, we reject these categories. First, they offer a caricatured version of working-class families, and second, we object to the values which inhere in the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' groups in society. Nevertheless, in assessing the outcomes of recent UK education policy, we wish to apply the conception of equity encapsulated in this distinction, that is the distribution of resources according to desert. For the purposes of this activity, we define the 'deserving' as those families - in particular, low-income ones - desiring to take advantage of the new 'opportunities' offered to them by the extension of choice in education through the policy of open enrolment. In short, we are concerned to explore how successful the UK education market is in terms of achieving one of the key aims its architects have constructed for it. However, we are not going to look for a perfect distribution of education

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[2]A claim often made by right-wing Conservatives but given particular prominence recently by Peter Lilly (Secretary of State for Social Security)'s speech to the 1993 Conservative Party annual conference.

[3]Neo-liberal advocates of the UK market do argue that all students will benefit from the improvement in standards which greater diversity and competition can produce and that is an important argument. Nevertheless, it is assumed that in the market families will be differentially positioned and that this should be related to effort rather than any conception of need.

income according to desert, bearing in mind Gray's (1993) observation (following Hayek) that 'accepting market institutions involves accepting an unpredictable dispersion of rewards that is only partly connected with anyone's merits and deserts' (p91). Our test will be whether the new education market is improving the chances of access to a better quality education for those deemed 'deserving' in Conservative discourse.

Needs-based equity

The second conception of equity we wish to consider - and one we have more sympathy with - is that which is embedded in left-wing arguments for choice, a needs-based definition. This is represented by the maxim, 'From each according to his/her capacity, to each according to his/her need'.

A needs-based conception of equity is implicit in Crump's (1994) defence of markets in education. Programmes of choice which 'build on genuine democratic community interests' (p.2), he argues, have the potential to be more equitable than bureaucratically managed systems because they are more likely to make state schools more responsive to the 'different needs and interests' of 'low-income, minority, single-parent and other excluded groups':

> These groups vary in their ability to help their children on their own, not because they are lacking something within themselves, but because there are few effective practices in public schools that respond to their different needs and interests. Most top-down funding since the 1960s has assumed that the deficit is in the knowledge of under-achievers rather than in the system itself through the exclusivity of the majority culture. Comprehensive school structures did not mean comprehensive curriculum. These schools force mixed groupings into the same site then accentuate diversions from the norm rather than broadening the definition of what is 'normal'. There is little justification for compulsion in education when it not only compels attendance but also imposes a world view that is to be learnt, studied and examined but which is only one imperfect construction of our social history. (p.7)

By needs, Crump seems to be refering to the needs of all children - but specifically minority ones whose needs have been neglected in the past - to have access to a curriculum which does not impose an alien culture but which recognises and values the culture of children's families and their particular ways of seeing the world. He denies the contention 'that parents are only interested in the individual well-being of their child to the exclusion of the general welfare of all pupils' arguing that, 'In schools where home-school connections are conducted with sensitivity and maturity ... parents willingly contribute to a broad band of pupils in a class or school group' (p7).

Crump is not arguing that choice is a perfect system of educational income distribution , merely that it is the 'best lousy theory' (p.9) with the potential to 'improve existing conditions'; and he takes critics of choice to task for their 'unrealistic expectations and measure' that choice should be in the interests of everyone (p.4).

While a desert-based notion of equity underpins the design and legitimatory discourse of the UK market, needs-based conceptions appear to be alien to this discourse and are not incorporated in the design of the new system of provision, as we shall see. The UK market differs in this respect from some of the US experiments with choice and competition which were designed for the express purpose of meeting the educational needs of those members of society deemed to be academically 'at risk' from zoned systems of provision[4]. Such children are seen to be especially concentrated in urban areas and amongst the economically disadvantaged and ethnic and language minority group children. Henry Levin (1990)

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[4]E.g. choice programmes in New York City's District 4 (Domanico 1989, Fliegel 1990), Massachusetts (Glenn 1990), Milwaukee and Minnesota (Bennett 1990).

defines a needs-based system of education income distribution as one ~~in which~~ 'persons from different social groups should have equal access to the types of resources that they need to succeed educationally'. If this principle is going to be translated into practice, Levin suggests, at least two requirements must be set:

> First, educational resources available for each student should favour those with greater educational need ... and those with fewer private resources in the home and community to be able to meet educational needs - for example, low income and single parent families. Second, families from different social origins ought to have at least equal ability to exercise choices among all of the available alternatives. This requires equal access to information about alternatives as well as equal ability to exercise choice. (p268)

For the purposes of evaluating the needs-based equity implications of the UK market we want to use Levin's conception, as summarised above. But, as with the desert-based conception of equity, we want to apply the needs-based definition realistically, that is, bearing in mind Crump's assertion that we should not expect a perfect system of distribution according to need. Our test will be whether the UK market is resulting **in a more equitable distribution of educational resources according to need than existed previously**. Although the architects of the UK market might not recognise this as a relevant test, we do not wish to be confined in our analysis solely by what such policy makers deem to be appropriate criteria of evaluation. We believe that there may be lessons to be learnt from the UK market experience, irrespective of the intentions of its architects, which might inform the construction of education programmes which **are** designed to engender a needs-based distribution of educational resources.

The UK education market

The UK education market as it exists today was set in motion by a package of reforms introduced as a result of the 1988 ERA. That legislation was designed to 'deregulate'[5] both the demand and supply sides of state-provided education, to 'empower' the customers (usually defined as the parents) and to make schools more 'responsive' to consumer demand.

On the demand side, children are no longer assigned to their local school according to the catchment area (or zone) they reside in. The policy of open enrolment means that parents (and children) have 'a right' to the school of their choice 'unless it is full to capacity with pupils who have a stronger claim' (Department of Education and Science 1991). They also have 'a right' to particular kinds of information about schools. This includes school prospectuses as well as exam and truancy league tables of local schools which are published in booklet form and summarised in local newspapers. These rights and some responsibilities are set out in the *Parent's Charter* (Department of Education and Science 1991)

On the supply side, the funding of schools is now primarily dependent on the numbers of pupils schools attract and pupil need plays a very small part in the budget formulae employed (Lee 1992). Thus schools now have a financial incentive to attract parents and children. In addition many of the management functions of local education authorities (LEAs) (school districts) have been devolved by the Local Management of Schools (LMS) policy. School governors are now responsible for appointing and dismissing staff; in conjunction with head teachers, they are responsible for managing school budgets; and they can tender for contracts and vire funds across budget heads. One of the key rationales for

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[5]It is important to note that although the rhetoric is of 'deregulation', the UK education market is in fact highly regulated. Whilst local government control of education is steadily being eroded, central state control is being enhanced by the national curriculum and the growing grant-maintained sector whose schools are directly funded by the Secretary of State for Education.

LMS was that it would give schools the capacity and flexibility to become more responsive to parental wishes. The 1988 ERA also established a new sector of schools, the grant-maintained (GM) sector which enables schools to 'opt out' of LEA control and operate as independent schools funded directly by central government. (These are similar to charter schools in the US). As well as contributing to the policy of weakening LEA control over schooling, the GM programme was part of a claimed intent to introduce greater diversity into public education provision in an effort to break the so-called 'dull conformity' of the comprehensive school system (Patten, cited in Hackett 1994). (There are now 814 such schools, 554 of them secondary). The establishment of City Technology Colleges (CTCs), independent state secondary schools partly funded by the private sector and with an emphasis on technology, was another attempt to foster diversity. (There are now fifteen CTCs.) And the 1993 Act was to extend that principle by allowing schools to opt out in order to take on specific curricular specialisms (like US magnet schools). That legislation also allows parents or other groups to be awarded state funding for the purposes of setting up and running their own schools. (There are as yet no such schools.)

The UK market comes close to conforming to Chubb and Moe's (1990) ideal education market in which:

> Most of those who previously held authority over the schools would have their authority permanently withdrawn and that authority would be vested in schools, parents, and students. Schools would be legally autonomous: free to govern themselves as they want, specify their own goals and programs and methods, design their own organisations, select their own student bodies, and make their own personnel decisions. Parents and students would be legally empowered to choose among alternative schools, aided by institutions designed to promote active involvement, well-informed decisions, and fair treatment (p.226).

The UK model **almost** conforms to this ideal - but not quite. First, although the LEAs have had much of their authority withdrawn, they still have some residual control over LMS schools. Many authorities, for instance, still control admissions to LMS schools; and the legislation is ambiguous, when there is a conflict between governors and a LEA, on whether the responsibility for dismissing a head teacher lies with the governors of an LMS school or the LEA. Second, UK state schools have a statutory obligation to teach the national curriculum and conduct national assessments of students. These measures establish a required minimum curriculum and a formal regime of testing and, in practice, as we report below, have a considerable impact upon classroom method. Third, schools are not entirely free to select their own student bodies. Formally they must adhere to pre-existing admissions criteria most commonly based on whether applicants already have siblings at the school and on the proximity of applicants' homes to the school. If schools want to alter their selection criteria, for instance so that they can select on the basis of ability, they must make a special application to the Secretary of State. A small and growing number of schools have been given such permission. However, **covertly**, schools appear to be selecting regardless of the statutory limitations on their doing so (Bush et al 1993). (We discuss these informal selection practices below and consider their implications for equity.) Fourth, there are nowhere in the UK legislation any provisions designed to ensure that institutions **promote** 'fair treatment'. Research has indicated that, to the contrary, the market mechanism is in practice serving to exclude or marginalise policies designed to encourage anti-sexism and anti-racism in schools (Reynolds 1993, Troyna et al 1993). This is because many of these policies emanated from the very LEAs which the legislation is designed to undermine. And, as we demonstrate below, it is highly debatable how far vulnerable children, specifically those with special educational needs, are receiving 'fair treatment' in the UK market.

It is important to note that in the UK, equity is only one amongst a number of rationales for the introduction of choice and competition in schooling. Furthermore equity has never been as prominent a rationale in the UK as it has been for the introduction of choice programmes elsewhere, particularly in the US. The main legitimatory arguments in the UK for the introduction of market forces into education provision are: first that they will drive up

standards because, so the logic goes, good schools will thrive and poor ones go to the wall; and second that it will foster diversity and break the monopoly of comprehensive schools. Many have argued that the **main agenda** of the reforms is to resurrect and revalorise hierarchy and selection in education (e.g. Simon 1988, Chitty 1992).

The markets study

The 1988 ERA and ensuing legislation has spawned a fair amount of research activity. The vast majority of studies have a very specific focus - either on particular actors in the market, e.g. parents (Glatter et al 1992) and governors (Deem and Brehony 1993); or on specific elements of the market mechanism, e.g. LMS (Levacic 1992), GM schools (Fitz et al 1993) and CTCs (Whitty et al 1993); or on the market's implications for various constituencies, e.g. ethnic minorities (Troyna et al 1993) and children with special needs (Lee 1992, Vincent et al 1993). Our own study, with its broader focus, is a unique attempt to explore and understand the **dynamics of education markets** in the UK. It is an exploration of the relationships amongst the various actors in and elements of education markets and the outcomes of this complex network of interactions for the structure, organisation and values of schooling and for patterns of distribution of educational income.

We have adopted a case-study methodology, focusing on three adjacent LEAs in London - Westway, Riverway and Northwark[6]. These authorities were chosen, first, because they represent 'critical cases' of education markets, that is the geography and demography of these areas maximise the possibilities for real competition between schools for children. And second, because the three LEAs differ from each other in terms of political control, LEA policy and social make-up of the respective populations.

Over the three years, 130 in-depth, unstructured interviews have been conducted with parents from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds who were in the process of making a choice of secondary school for their children. These interviews have given us information about contrasting family orientations to choice, the constraints on and possibilities of choice, and the factors that are important to parents when choosing a secondary school.

Across the three LEAs, we have focused with varying degrees of intensity on a sample of fifteen schools chosen to reflect a range in terms of status, subscription levels, social and ethnic make up, geographical location, and management responses to the market. In the schools, we identified key informants to interview, e.g. chairs of governors, parent and teacher governors, head and deputy head teachers, long-serving, medium-serving and newly-qualified teachers, special needs co-ordinators, union representatives and bursars. The broad aims of the interviews were to identify and explore the effects of the market on recruitment activities in the school, school policy- and decision-making, the work of teachers and governors, and on social relations in the school. We also observed governors meetings, recruitment committee meetings and staff training days.

We have employed throughout a 'Straussian' research methodology (Strauss 1987) based upon the techniques of theoretical sampling and constant comparison. This involves a process of progressive focusing driven by the feedback of analysis into data collection. The approach is based upon the identification of key categories through a process of coding transcripts and observation data. The categories are subject to continuous interrogation and revision in the light of new data, and typically initial categories are refined, developed, sub-divided or abandoned. The coding process is qualitative and interpretative.

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[6]To preserve the anonymity of our informants, pseudonyms for places and people are used.

Project findings

The findings we present here are those which shed light on the implications of choice and competition in education for equity. Constraints of space mean that we are only able here to convey the essence of our findings. Those interested in seeing more data and a more detailed analysis are referred to other project papers (Ball et al 1993a, 1993b, 1994a & 1994b, Gewirtz et al, 1994a & 1994b, Bowe 1995)

There are four key findings we wish to report here:

1. THE MARKET IS A MIDDLE-CLASS MODE OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT.
2. PARENTAL CHOICE OF SCHOOL IS CLASS- AND RACE-INFORMED.
3. SCHOOLS ARE INCREASINGLY ORIENTED TOWARDS MEETING THE PERCEIVED DEMANDS OF MIDDLE-CLASS PARENTS.
4. THE CUMULATIVE IMPACT OF FINDINGS 1-3 IS THE 'DE-COMPREHENSIVISATION' OF SECONDARY SCHOOLING.

1. THE MARKET IS A MIDDLE-CLASS MODE OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Our parental interviews indicate very striking class-based differences in family orientations to the market both in terms of parental inclination to engage with it and in terms of parents' capacity to exploit the market to their children's advantage. These differences are starkly represented by the three types of parents which emerged from our coding of the data - which we have labelled the privileged/skilled choosers, the semi-skilled choosers and the disconnected.

The privileged/skilled choosers, who are almost exclusively professional middle-class, have always been advantaged in terms of access to educational resources. They were well-placed to get their children into schools of their choice prior to the ERA and they continue to occupy a favourable position post-ERA. The privileged/skilled choosers are inclined to a consumerist approach to choice of school; 'that is the idea and worth of having a choice between schools is valued' (Ball et al 1994b) and there is a concern to examine what is on offer and seek out 'the best'. As we have written elsewhere, these choosers demonstrated:

> a marked capacity to engage with and utilise the possibilities of choice. Economic, social and cultural capital are all important here. [They] were able to 'decode' school systems and organisation; to discriminate between schools in terms of policies and practices; to engage with, question (and challenge ...) teachers and school managers; to critically evaluate teacher's responses; and to collect, scan and interpret various sources of information ... Many of the families who fall within this ideal type had some kind of 'inside' knowledge of education systems and the way they work ... These families also possessed the financial resources to be able to move their children around the school system in a variety of senses ... [They] are engaged in a process of child-matching, that is they are looking to find a school which will suit the particular proclivities, interests, aspirations and/or personality of their child. The child is often complexly constructed in terms of traits, needs and talents.
>
> (Ball et al 1994b)

The privileged/skilled choosers are oriented to

> cosmopolitan, high-profile, elite, maintained schools which recruit some or often many of their students from outside of their immediate locale, which have reputations which extend well beyond their home LEAs, some of which are (overtly) selective, i.e. grammar schools, others of which have 'pseudo-selective' or limited catchment criteria. These schools are usually considered over-subscribed.
>
> (Ball et al 1994a)

These schools are often considered by privileged/skilled choosers alongside the 'local' system of private day schools. The privileged/skilled are 'confident about their use of space and their children's ability to manage travel' and tend not to be constrained by unfamiliarity (Ball et al 1994a).

The semi-skilled choosers tend to emanate from a variety of class backgrounds, but most importantly for the purposes of the current discussion, this group is likely to include those families which we suggest are targeted by Conservative education policy - working-class families, disadvantaged by the system of 'selection by mortgage', who are strongly motivated to make the most of the 'opportunities' for choice afforded to them by open enrolment. Semi-skilled choosers are strongly inclined to engage with the market, but they do not have the requisite capacity to exploit it to their children's advantage - 'Their cultural capacity is in the wrong currency and they are less able to accumulate the right sort' (Gewirtz et al 1994a):

> Their biographies and family histories have not provided them with the experiences or inside knowledge of the school system and the social contacts and cultural skills to pursue their inclination to choice 'effectively' ... Significantly, the accounts generated by those families who fit the profile of the semi-skilled ... is that they are simpler and starker than the privileged ... Complexity is often reduced and schools are portrayed in terms of general qualities - positive and negative. There is an appearance of certainty in the judgements being made but frequently this is derived from a limited informational base ... These families talk about potential school choices as outsiders, often relying, at least in part, on the comments and perceptions of others.
>
> (Ball et al 1994b)

Semi-skilled choosers may also be hampered by finance-related considerations including time and transport constraints. The mismatch between inclination and capacity amongst the semi-skilled may mean that these families are frustrated in the market place (Gewirtz et al 1994a). Some semi-skilled choosers may be oriented to the cosmopolitan, high profile, elite, maintained schools but may have to 'settle' for the local, community, comprehensive schools, 'which recruit the majority of their students from their immediate locality, have highly localised reputations and which have policies and structures which relate to a comprehensive school identity' (Ball et al 1994a).

The disconnected choosers are almost exclusively working-class. The market is of limited relevance to this group who are disconnected from it because they do not engage with it. Disconnected choosers are highly oriented to the local, community, comprehensive schools, partly as a result of a positive attachment to the locality and to going to school with friends and family. In addition, 'School has to be "fitted into" a set of constraints and expectations related to work roles, family roles, the sexual division of labour and the demands of household organisation'. And for low-income families on time-constrained budgets, the limitations of private and public transport play a key role in decision making (Ball et el 1994a).

The three 'types' of chooser illustrate two ways in which families may be privileged or disadvantaged in the market. First, competition between parents for schools disadvantages those families who are inclined to enter the competition but who are not well placed to exploit the market in ways which appear to be to their advantage, either because of insufficient finances or inappropriate cultural capital. Second, choice has different meanings in different class and cultural contexts; it is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon; and families are disadvantaged or privileged as a consequence of the values which inform their conceptions of choice making. The model of choice making advocated by the government and encapsulated in the *Parent's Charter* (1991) represents only one model - the consumerist version so comfortably embraced by the privileged/skilled choosers and perhaps less comfortably - if equally enthusiastically - by the semi-skilled choosers. But that particular construction of choice making is irrelevant to the disconnected or local

choosers. Because they value locality over and above other considerations when it comes to choosing a school, they are not inclined to spend time immersing themselves in consumerist activity and agonising over a range of possible options. There is therefore:

> a mismatch between the culture of consumption of the local-school choosers and the culture of provision. The culture of provision is much more closely matched to the culture of consumption of the privileged chooser. To use Williamson's (1981) terminology ... the market form of school provision reflects the 'ideal of cultivation' of the dominant group. Or in Bourdieuan terms, the habitus of the market is also the habitus of the dominant class.
>
> (Gewirtz et al 1994, p26)

Because schools are funded on the basis of how many students they have, 'locality' is not a value which the market system rewards. The high-profile, elite, cosmopolitan, maintained schools which the skilled and some semi-skilled choosers tend to orient themselves to are likely to be over-subscribed and therefore favourably staffed and resourced. Such schools can benefit from the economies of scale that being full offers them. The local, community, comprehensive schools, on the other hand, may be - although will not necessarily be - under-subscribed. They will have similar overheads in terms of building maintenance, fuel bills etc. as the over-subscribed schools and have to offer the same range of courses but to student bodies which may have higher levels of need (because of their socio-economic profiles). But under-subscribed schools will have less money to work with and are therefore likely to be under-resourced and under-staffed. This will make it extremely difficult for 'local' schools to match the perceived quality of service of the 'cosmopolitan' schools.

2. PARENTAL CHOICE OF SCHOOL IS CLASS- AND RACE-INFORMED.

A further aspect of choice-making which tends to be neglected in the literature on parental choice but which emerges from our own data is that parents seem to make choices on the basis of the perceived class and in some instances 'racial' composition of schools' student bodies. There would appear to be at least two reasons for the invisibility of class- and 'race'-informed choosing in the literature. First, parents in interview on the whole are reluctant to offer class and 'race' as factors influencing their choice of school since in the UK 'public domain' these are neither 'accepted' nor 'acceptable' reasons for choosing a school - although euphemisms are employed, e.g. references to 'rougher elements'. Second, attitudes to class and 'race' are deeply ingrained and may 'function below the level of consciousness and language' (Bourdieu 1986, p466) so that parents may not recognise or acknowledge that they are making class- or 'racially'-informed choices.

Despite the difficulties of accessing data on 'race'- and class-informed choosing, our methodology has enabled us to gain some insight into these aspects of school choice. After analysing the first round of interviews, we found that, in talking about their reasons for choosing particular schools, parents commonly referred to the 'intuitiveness' of school choice, to 'gut-feelings', and our suspicion was that such replies may indicate a 'sub-structure' of thinking about school choice underlying and informing a 'super-structure' of commonly proffered reasons - discipline, uniform, facilities, ethos, results, teaching styles etc. In subsequent interviews, we set out to explore with parents what their 'intuitions' and 'gut feelings' consisted of - What was it about the school that made it 'just feel right'? Similarly, when parents said they chose on the basis of 'discipline', 'uniform', 'ethos' or because their child would be 'happy' we attempted to ascertain what parents meant by 'discipline', 'uniform', 'ethos' and 'happiness' and why these factors were important to them. Our analysis of the interviews indicated that 'there are class related messages/signs to be read off from the school setting, the demeanour of students and the attitude of staff' and that parents 'may be said to be seeking a match between family habitus and school habitus' (Ball et al 1994b). These 'class related messages/signs' are subtle and we do not have space to

include illustrations here but these are provided within an extended discussion of this issue in Ball et al (1994b).

Racism as a factor influencing school choice emerged amongst the semi-skilled and disconnected choosers. The skilled/privileged parents did not refer to social mix in these terms. This may be because most of our skilled/privileged parents were from Riverway which has a very small ethnic minority population, but also because such parents may be more skilled in disguising their racism. 'Racially'-informed choosing is particularly prominent in south Westway, with many white working-class parents rejecting Gorse school because of its high intake of pupils with a South Asian background and with some South Asian parents choosing that school because it is regarded as 'safe' and because of its overt emphasis on educational traditionalism and academic achievement.

Segregation by class and 'race' within the UK education system is not new. The system of assigning children to schools on the basis of catchment areas which operated prior to ERA meant that schools have always been socially and 'racially' segregated **to the extent that geographical segregation exists**. The policy of choice in education is unlikely to reduce segregation, given that parental choices *are informed* both by class and and often by 'race'. If anything, choice may well exacerbate segregation by extending it into previously integrated schools serving socially and 'racially' mixed geographical areas. Furthermore processes of segregation are likely to be enhanced because of the premium being placed by schools on 'able' children, an issue we want to move on to discuss now.

3. SCHOOLS ARE INCREASINGLY ORIENTED TOWARDS MEETING THE PERCEIVED DEMANDS OF MIDDLE-CLASS PARENTS.

In the UK education market place, schools have an incentive to maximise their exam league table performance at minimum cost. Because the bulk of schools' funding is on the basis of pupil numbers and not need, those children designated as more 'able' are worth more to schools than those with learning difficulties. Filling up a school with able children and keeping children with special educational needs to a minimum is the cheapest and most labour-efficient way of enhancing league table performance. Critical commentators have suggested that the logic of the market implies that children with special educational needs will increasingly be viewed as a liability in the market place and that resources will flow to the most able (Willey 1989, Lee 1992 and Housden 1993). That is the 'logic' of the market, but what is the practice?

We found a widespread belief within our case-study schools, particularly under-subscribed ones, that in order to survive in the market place, it was necessary not only to fill the school to capacity but also to raise the raw-score performance potential of school intakes. School managers and staff speak about the need to target those sections of the population likely to enhance their league table performance in various ways. Some refer to the need to attract more 'able' pupils and others, because of the association between measured ability and social class, talk about a desire to appeal to more middle-class families. Others, more reticent about using the language of class, speak euphemistically about targeting more 'motivated' parents. But, whatever the language employed, schools are adopting a number of strategies in order to raise the raw-score performance potential of their intakes, and, because of the correlation between measured ability and social class, school policies on a variety of issues are being increasingly influenced by a desire to attract more middle-class and, in some cases, aspiring working-class parents. (Although it is important to note that the desire to appeal to the middle-class parent is usually only one amongst several rationales for the development of such policies.) Some examples of policies designed, at least in part, to make school intakes more middle-class include the following:

The re-introduction of setting

Schools which previously taught mixed-ability classes are now re-introducing setting. This is a response to the testing requirements of the national curriculum as well as to a perceived preference amongst middle-class parents for setting. Whilst setting might benefit - or certainly not disadvantage - the 'able' middle class child, research has shown that it discriminates against those placed in the lowest groupings who are more likely to be from working-class and black families (Hargreaves 1967, Lacey 1970, Ball 1981, Troyna 1978, Mortimore et al 1988). As Tomlinson has observed, 'ability is an ambiguous concept and school conceptions of ability can be affected by perceptions that pupils are members of particular social and ethnic groups and by the behaviour of individual pupils' (Tomlinson 1987).

The devalorisation of special educational needs

In schools with a high proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and with good reputations for special needs provision, managers are increasingly concerned that the composition and image of the school will operate as a disincentive to middle-class parents applying to the school. The fear is that such schools will be viewed as 'sink' schools or secondary moderns. In one of our under-subscribed case-study schools, a senior manager put pressure on the head of special needs to 'keep a low profile' when visiting primary schools. In another, the debate at senior management level on whether or not to accept two students with severe learning difficulties revolved around commercial rather than educational considerations (Gewirtz et al 1994). In some schools we are beginning to see a shift in emphasis in how special educational needs are defined, with more attention being devoted to 'gifted' children.

Special needs departments seem to be emerging as particular casualties of budgetary 'flexibility'. In a number of our case study schools, concern was expressed about the redeployment of special needs teachers to subject areas because of pressure on resources in the school and as a means of avoiding job losses[7]. Where redundancies have to be made, special needs teachers are amongst the most vulnerable because a) they are viewed as less economical than subject teachers because they do not teach whole classes; b) there is no legal requirement for special needs provision (except for children with statements) whilst there is a statutory requirement to teach the national curriculum; and c) special needs teachers tend to be employed on a more casual basis than specialist subject teachers. But underlying all of this is the 'logic' of the market which suggests that resources are better invested in those children likely to get five or more grades A-C in the GCSE examinations taken at 16, so that within schools' spending priorities, special needs provision becomes a less worthwhile investment and is thus devalorised.

Selection and exclusions

Selection and exclusions are perhaps the most effective means schools have at their disposal for controlling their student composition and thus for enhancing the raw-score potential of their student bodies. There is evidence that nationally exclusions are on the increase[8], and figures for our case-study authorities reflect the national picture. Exclusions provide a way of removing those children likely to get the lowest raw-exam scores and also of appealing to

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[7]Other studies suggest that such 'functional flexibility' is becoming increasingly usual in schools (Spalding 1993 and Sinclair et al 1993, pp.19&22).

[8]Permanent exclusions rose nationally by 66% between 1988 and 1991 and by a further 31% between 1991 and 1992 (DES and Advisory Centre for Education statistics, cited in Pyke et al 1993. See also Barnardos/FSU 1994.)

middle-class parents by conveying an image of a school which is tough on discipline (although school managers are also concerned that too many exclusions can have the opposite effect, conveying the message of a 'problem' school). In addition, the figures suggest that black boys are disproportionately represented amongst the excluded.

There is also evidence that nationally covert selection is on the increase, with interviews being conducted prior to places being offered in order to assess 'suitability' (Bush 1994). This is a phenomenon which is widely held to be taking place in the two over-subscribed GM schools in Northwark. These schools are also accused by their competitors of 'poaching' the more 'able' students when they have vacancies. Interestingly, these two schools have now been granted permission by the Secretary of State for Education from 1995 to select 30% of their intakes on the basis of 'ability'. In fact, all of the secondary schools in Northwark will be undertaking some form of selection at eleven, although in these other schools selection is said to be on the basis of 'aptitude' for particular curricular areas rather than 'ability'. Developments in Northwark are of particular interest because, as one of the Conservative government's 'flagship' boroughs, the authority is putting into practice the policies of selection and specialisation which the 1993 Education Act appears designed to promote[9].

The selective and exclusionary practices of schools, working in association with the class-biased nature of the market as a form of social engagement, and the selection of schools by parents according to class- and 'racially'-based criteria, appear to be intensifying the social segregation of schooling.[10]

4. THE CUMULATIVE IMPACT OF FINDINGS 1-3 IS THE 'DE-COMPREHENSIVISATION' OF SECONDARY SCHOOLING.

In the two decades preceding the 1988 ERA, it is possible to speak of a process of comprehensivisation taking place within the UK. A comprehensive system of educational provision is based on the principles that it is socially and educationally advantageous for all children, whatever their ability, class or ethnic background, to be educated together in a 'common school' and in mixed ability settings; and that all children should have access to a learning environment which enables them to realise their potential. Since the Warnock Report (1978) a central tenet of UK comprehensivism has been the belief that the majority of children with special educational needs achieve better when integrated in mainstream schools and in mainstream classes, that 'The higher the range of achievement and expectation within an educational community, the higher standards all children will reach' (Housden 1993, p.8). The available evidence suggests that comprehensivisation is of particular benefit to working-class children because the school 'context' (or class nature of the pupil composition) has been shown to be an important factor in affecting achievement. Data from Scotland suggest that:

> comprehensive reorganisation substantially reduced between-school SES [socio-economic status] segregation ... This gave manual pupils access to more 'favourable' school contexts, and is probably one reason why levels of attainment rose faster for manual pupils up to the mid-1980s than for non-manual pupils (McPherson and Williams 1987).

However, the UK never had a truly comprehensive system (although comprehensivisation was more thorough in Scotland than in England and Wales): status hierarchies persisted throughout the so-called comprehensive era; only a handful of schools had fully comprehensive intakes; a few LEAs never undertook comprehensive reorganisation; and

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[9]What might be called a form of 'market planning'.

[10]We are currently in the process of using small area census data to analyse the changing social composition of schools.

middle-class families have always benefited disproportionately from educational provision (Mortimore and Blackstone 1982). This situation, which is replicated in other areas of welfare, is used by supporters of welfare markets to bolster their arguments. Gray (1993, p.104), for instance, claims that, 'There is no persuasive ethical justification for the massive, over extended welfare states of most modern societies, which often involve perverse redistributions to the middle-classes.' Such 'perverse redistributions' have led a number of observers to question why those on the left are so opposed to the recent welfare reforms. We would argue, however, with respect to education, that although the pre-ERA UK education system was far from perfectly comprehensive, many schools were able to maintain relatively mixed intakes and to develop, often in conjunction with LEAs, policies and strategies designed to promote equal opportunity for students on the basis of class, 'race', gender and ability. We share Housden's (1993, p.13) view that, 'However flawed the concept may originally have been, the comprehensive structure has created the conditions for the further development of inclusive strategies'.

Our evidence suggests that the processes of the UK market seem to be reversing that trend and to be contributing to a process of 'de-comprehensivisation'. We have seen that in the UK market, parents are far from equally desirous or able to make choices and the price for children of their parents not making a choice is greatly increased. **Across** schools, we are seeing an intensification of status hierarchies, provisional differentiation and segregation within the state system. Working-class children, and particularly children with special educational needs are being increasingly 'ghetto-ised' in under-resourced and under-staffed low status schools. The effects of school 'context' on pupil achievement, together with the under-resourcing and under-staffing of such schools, are likely to significantly impair the learning achievement of the children attending them. Because black children are disproportionately represented amongst the economically disadvantaged sections of the population, they are likely also to be disproportionately represented in the under-resourced and under-staffed schools. And the re-introduction of setting and the devalorisation of special educational needs means that **within** schools, segregation and provisional differentiation also seem to be occuring.

Conclusion

Effectively, the processes of de-comprehensivisation mean that resources are flowing from those children with greatest need to those with least need. Thus we are seeing a growing inequality of access to the quality of provision necessary for children to succeed educationally. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the architects of the UK market were not primarily committed to needs-based equity. But our research also indicates that the UK market fails the desert-based equity test, because success in the market place is not primarily a function of family motivation but rather of parental skill, the perceived raw-score potential of the child, and, to some extent, pure chance.

In many ways the education markets we have been researching are peculiar and specific to metropolitan areas within the UK where parents have access, geographically, to a range of schools and where there is genuine competition between schools for children. However, we believe that there are lessons to be learnt from our research which are of relevance beyond the UK. That the market is a middle-class mode of social engagement is likely to be the case whatever the particular market form adopted. Middle-class parents, we suggest, will always be most inclined to engage with the market and best skilled to exploit it to their children's advantage. (The market is a perverse system of education income allocation in this respect, in that children are rewarded largely in proportion to the skill and interest of their parents.) That some parents make choices on the basis of the class and 'racial' composition of schools is also likely to be a general characteristic of markets in socially and culturally diverse societies. That schools are increasingly oriented towards meeting the perceived demands of middle-class parents, however, may well be a more specific product of the UK market. It is the outcome of a market where funding takes minimal account of pupil need,

where there is a highly regulated curriculum and regime of testing which encourages segregation and provisional differentiation, where schools are made to feel they are going to be primarily judged on their raw examination scores, and where the devices of selection and exclusion are permitted as means of controlling pupil compositions.

It might be possible, with some imagination, to regulate a market in ways which encourage a more equitable outcome on a needs-based definition of equity. By adopting needs-led funding, more educationally useful performance indicators and assessment procedures, and by completely removing from schools the right to control their own pupil compositions, it may well be possible to curb the iniquities associated with relatively uncontrolled choice and competition. But in a market system divested of provisional and intake differentials, it is highly questionable whether any demand for choice in education would be sustained. This is because, on the whole, parental desire for choice is a response to inequitable provision. But choice, however regulated, is not the solution to inequity. From a needs-based perspective, primacy needs to be given to establishing comprehensive pupil intakes, to allocating resources in ways which will facilitate the realisation of children's learning potentials, and to making schools responsive to the values and cultures of the children that go to them. It is regulation, commitment and flair, not choice, that is necessary for the realisation of these goals. As far as equity is concerned, choice is a red herring.

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